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ABSTRACT

Distance education is an alternative method for delivering academic course work to students unable to attend traditional campus-based classes. This Digest presents information on the many forms of distance education and keys to successful teaching with distance education. Distance education is a method of education in which the learner is physically separated from the teacher and the institution sponsoring the instruction. There must be a teacher, one or more students, and a course or curriculum that the teacher is capable of teaching and the student wants to learn. Originally, distance education involved teachers traveling to remote sites to teach a class or teachers corresponding with students. Technology has raised the quality of individualized distance instruction. There are video and audio models of distance education that involve broadcast and cable television, satellites, microwaves, fiber optics, and audio graphics. The linking of computer technology via the Internet or CD-ROM with television transmission potentially provides a new dimension to distance education. Distance education can be used for some aspects of most disciplines. It dictates changes in behavior for both teachers and students. Five critical elements for successful distance teaching include: instructor enthusiasm, organization, strong commitment to student interaction, familiarity with technology used in the class, and critical support personnel. (Contains 8 references.) (SM)

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Effective Teaching in Distance Education

For over 100 years, distance education has served as an alternative method for delivering academic course work to students unable to attend traditional campus-based classes. The format of distance education varies from correspondence-style courses to technologically based courses using the Internet. Distance education offers students considerable benefits, including increased access to learning, lifelong learning opportunities, and convenience of time and place (St. Pierre, 1998). Distance education may be essential for learners who are truly place-bound because of factors such as employment, child-care demands, disability, or remoteness of the location where they live (Rintala, 1998). This digest presents information on the many forms distance education can take and keys to successful teaching with distance education.

What is Distance Education?

Distance education is a method of education in which the learner is physically separated from the teacher and the institution sponsoring the instruction. It may be used on its own, or in conjunction with other forms of education, including face-to-face instruction. In any distance education process there must be a teacher, one or more students, and a course or curriculum that the teacher is capable of teaching and the student is trying to learn. The contract between teacher and learner, whether in a traditional classroom or distance education, requires that the student be taught, assessed, given guidance and, where appropriate, prepared for examinations that may or may not be conducted by the institution. This must be accomplished by two-way communication. Learning may be undertaken either individually or in groups; in either case, it is accomplished in the physical absence of the teacher in distance education. Where distance teaching materials are provided to learners, they are structured in ways that facilitate learning at a distance.

Forms of Distance Education

In its original form, teachers using distance education traveled to remote sites and taught a class, or corresponded with students through mail, telephone, or fax machine. Individualized study has been a method of reaching the remote student for some time. Detailed course instructions are sent to the learner who performs the assigned tasks and returns the completed work to the teacher for evaluation and reassignment if necessary.

Technology has raised the quality of individualized distance instruction. The use of various forms of electronic media increases time effectiveness and improves the delivery of information. Video, audio, and computer-based applications may enhance the product received by the independent learner. Electronic delivery can occur using synchronous communication, in which class members participate at the same time, or asynchronous communication where participants are separated by time (Romiszowski, 1993).

Video/audio models of distance education include broadcast television, cable television, satellite, microwave, fiber optics, and audio graphics. The most widely used format is broadcast and cable television (Parrott, 1995). However, developments in satellite and fiber optic systems have produced other successful programs. The interactive capability of many of these networks has produced a distance classroom that is nearly identical to a regular classroom. Teachers and students can interact through both two-way video and one-way video with two-way audio systems. The recent development of Desktop Video Conferencing (DVC), which brings interactive video capability to the desktop computer, further enhances learning opportunities.

The linking of computer technology through the use of the Internet or CD-ROM with television transmission provides a potentially new dimension to distance education. This technique can link university professors to high school teachers, or to physically disabled students, in a distance setting (McLean, 1996).

Another form of interaction is the use of computer conferencing. This method utilizes asynchronous communication in such forms as an e-mail list group, an Internet discussion group, or other types of conferencing software. Asynchronous methods of communication are especially appealing to the learner who has difficulty scheduling specific time- and place-bound course work.

Adaptability

Distance education can be used for some aspects of most disciplines. For example, several institutions of higher education already have developed certificate programs, undergraduate programs, and graduate programs in health and physical education that are delivered using distance education methods. Eastern Oregon University, Emporia State University, Kutztown University, LaSalle University, the Medical College of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, and Virginia Tech are among institutions integrating distance technology into their physical education programs.

Traditional programs that are heavily based in skill development and demonstration or require laboratory work can be offered in a distance education framework using interactive video interfaced with computers to facilitate a hands-on learning approach at a distance. Classes that use lecture and laboratory experiences are easily adapted to a distance education situation. Course materials, including animals for dissection, are sent to class participants with video and written instructions and assignments.

Effective Teaching and Learning With Distance Education

Distance education dictates changes in behavior for both the teacher and the learner. The successful student develops persistence and skills in self-directing work. The successful distance education teacher becomes conversant with new technology and develops new instructional styles, moving from creating instruction to managing resources and students and disseminating views (Strain, 1987). Administrative and faculty support for distance education are critical to the success of this instructional method. Administrators should take note that the implementation of a distance education program may allow access to a greater number of students. However, the time and work associated with teaching at a distance exceeds the normal requirements of campus-based instruction.

Students in distance education settings perform as well or better on assignments, class activities, and exams when compared to campus-based students (St. Pierre, 1998). Nevertheless, students must maintain persistence and a clear focus to succeed in a distance learning situation. Self-direction, a passion for learning, and strong individual responsibility are important influences on achievement. There are indications that distance education works best for more mature, motivated, well-organized, and already accomplished learners (Rintala, 1998).

Garrels (1997) describes five critical elements for successful teaching at a distance:

Instructor enthusiasm. This requires animation and comfort in front of the camera, or with the technology utilized. Faculty support and interest are critical to the success of distance learning endeavors.

Organization. Teaching materials must be prepared in advance; timing, variation, and smooth transitions must be planned. Instructors should allocate from 3 to 5 hours of preparation for each hour of distance instruction. Great attention to detail is required long before the actual classroom activity occurs (Summers, 1997).

Strong commitment to student interaction. Whatever the modality used to teach at a distance, the instructor must encourage and facilitate ongoing communication between the students and the instructor.

Familiarity with the technology used in the class format. Faculty development is important before beginning any distance activities, and instructors should be trained in video use, computer use, or other forms of instructional technology used.

Critical support personnel. Production staff, graphic designers, and technical staff members will help the instructional setting produce successful teaching at a distance.

Conclusion

The potential use of distance education within all disciplines is tremendous as this application to higher education evolves within our culture. Distance education is not a panacea for the difficulties and barriers encountered in traditional educational settings, but it does provide the potential for greater service to more individuals seeking learning opportunities.

References

References identified with an EJ or ED number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles (EJ) should be available at most research libraries; most documents (ED) are available in microfiche collections at more than 900 locations. Documents can also be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (800-443-ERIC).

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